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Congress of the United States House of Representatives

DEMOCRATIC POLICY AND
COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE
CO-CHAIR

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
RANKING MEMBER OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON
MIDDLE EAST, NORTH AFRICA, AND CENTRAL ASIA

COMMITTEE ON SMALL BUSINESS
VICE RANKING MEMBER

PROBLEM SOLVERS CAUCUS

May 12, 2023

Honorable Mike Rogers
Chairman
Committee on Armed Services
U.S. House of Representatives
2469 Rayburn HOB
Washington, DC 20515

Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
U.S. House of Representatives
2264 Rayburn Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Rogers and Ranking Member Smith:

As you begin developing the Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) to establish defense policy for the next year, I write to communicate my priorities for this important piece of legislation.

Better Foreign Policy Through Better Pet Policy Act

As a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, I have seen firsthand the vital role that our foreign service officers play in our national security. A robust diplomatic presence is among the best tools we have to keep our country safe and support our allies abroad. It is therefore critical that we send our best and brightest personnel to serve our country in these positions.

To fully accomplish our foreign policy goals, we must decrease any unnecessary barriers to service that might stand in the way of ensuring the right officers are deployed to the right station. One such barrier that exists today is that federal personnel, including military service members, foreign service officers, and civilian employees, face hardship in traveling with their beloved pet when deployed to a new location. Under current law, all U.S. government personnel must deploy via U.S.-flagged air carriers when traveling on commercial flights. Since 2020, however, most U.S. airlines have stopped transporting dogs. As a result, federal personnel with dogs either “deploy twice”, once with their families on a U.S. carrier and again at their own expense with their pets on a foreign carrier, or pay thousands of dollars for a third-party cargo shipper.

The cost and difficulty of pet transport is causing personnel to avoid assignments to which they can’t easily bring their pets. According to a recent survey of foreign service officers with pets, more than 60 percent consider pet transport a barrier to serving in these priority assignments. We should not permit something as simple as transporting a pet to stand in the way of our objectives abroad. It is for that reason that I plan to



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introduce the *Better Foreign Policy Through Better Pet Policy Act* and urge its inclusion in the NDAA. This bipartisan bill would amend the Fly America Act to allow U.S. government personnel—military and civilian—to deploy via a foreign-flagged air carrier if they are deploying with a pet that no U.S.-flagged carriers will transport.

Love Lives On Act

Currently, surviving spouses of deceased federal personnel are faced with the cruel prospect of losing survivor benefits if they remarry before the age of 55. It is difficult enough for these spouses to move on after the loss of a loved one; we should not make it more difficult by threatening to withhold benefits owed to them as well. That is why I am leading the *Love Lives On Act*, which would ensure retention of many benefits from both the Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense upon remarriage no matter the surviving spouse's age.

Countering Gray Zone Activities

Increasingly, global conflict occurs in the so-called “gray zone”, the area between open conflict and peace. This asymmetrical warfare can be carried out through a variety of means, including through political and information campaigns, cyberattacks, and economic competition. While gray zone conflict is nothing new, the scope and scale of its use today demands a comprehensive strategy to put the United States in a position of strength compared with our adversaries.

Due to the United States' relative strength in all areas of national power, we have become victims of our own strength, and, as Dr. Kathleen Hicks, Deputy Secretary of Defense, described in CSIS's report on the Gray Zone, our competitors choose to use coercive tools because the costs of engaging the United States in open conflict is too high. What the United States has failed to do over the last decade is to increase the costs of engaging in gray zone tactics for countries like Russia and China. Additionally, there is large agreement amongst scholars and national security professionals that China will continue to engage in gray zone activities as part of their long-term national strategy around the globe until it is sufficiently challenged in these areas. Therefore, we must act now in a meaningful way or China will, most likely, overtake the U.S. economy within the next decade.

This is why I will continue my work from last year's NDAA and focus on how the United States deals with three distinct challenges associated with the gray zone: a lack of knowledge, a lack of a national strategy specific to the gray zone, and a lack of synchronization at the national level to win in the gray zone. To remedy the lack of knowledge, the Department of Defense should contract a study to analyze the latest



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gray zone tactics, some of which may not have been categorized by agencies in the executive branch because many gray zone tactics can often go unseen. Next, Congress should require that the President develop a strategy to not only defend against gray zone tactics, but to also go on the offensive when appropriate. Lastly, I propose we establish a National Gray Zone Director within the Executive Office of the President to develop national strategy, coordinate Executive Branch agencies, and synchronize all the elements of national power to compete and win in gray zone operations and other hybrid warfare methods of foreign adversaries and competitors.

Syria Detainee and Displaced Persons Act

It is incumbent on Congress and the Biden Administration to remain focused on our mission to ensure the enduring defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. While we have made much progress in this fight already, the situation in the detention facilities and camps that house ISIS fighters, ISIS-affiliated individuals, and those displaced during ISIS's reign of terror is growing more dire by the day. Maintaining the status quo at these facilities pose serious humanitarian and security challenges that must be given more prominent attention within the administration and the Congress.

In the FY 2020 NDAA, Congress established an ISIS Detainee Coordinator at the State Department to oversee U.S. government efforts to address these camps and detention facilities. This was a positive, yet limited, first step, and from it we have learned that more must be done to address this pressing problem. That is why I urge the Committee to include the *Syria Detainee and Displaced Persons Act* in the FY 2024 NDAA to build on our previous successes. In particular, this bill would elevate the ISIS Detainee Coordinator position to be a Senior Coordinator, extend its authority through 2025, and expand its mandate to include all inhabitants of these camps. It would also direct the development of an interagency strategy on how to address the camps, with an emphasis on efforts to address acute humanitarian and security concerns and on repatriation efforts.

Supporting Parents Who Serve

Federal personnel face significant challenges when they become parents, especially those who are low income. I want to ease the burden on federal parents through two minor, childcare-focused adjustments to existing programs:

Eliminate the Pregnancy Paradox

Under current law, prospective parents participating in the Federal Group Life Insurance (FGLI) program cannot change their coverage election until after their child is born. This means that, should the mother die during delivery, or should the non-birth parent die

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prior to the child's birth, there is no way to provide adequate life insurance protection for the care of the child. My forthcoming bill mandates that FEGLI consider pregnancy a qualifying life event (QLE) and allow FEGLI participants to amend their coverage election by providing proof of pregnancy from a medical provider. The participants can also revert to their pre-pregnancy coverage at any time within a year of the change, allowing them to adjust in the event of a miscarriage or other loss of the child.

Increase Equity in the State Department's Low-Income Childcare Subsidy Program

The State Department's low-income childcare subsidy currently only allows participants to join during a one-month open season each year. Unlike federal health or life insurance, it does not allow parents to enroll after the birth of a child or after returning from an overseas assignment. As a result, low-income employees who have a child or return from an overseas assignment must bear full childcare expenses for up to a year before being eligible to join during open season. This restriction is particularly detrimental at the State Department, where a large percentage of the workforce rotates back from overseas assignments, and where many foreign service officers qualify as low income. My forthcoming bill would amend the childcare subsidy program to allow low-income employees to join within 180 days of either their child's birth or returning from an overseas assignment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'D. Phillips', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Congressman Dean Phillips